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David O'Connor has criticized my arguments for the conclusion that God's existence is compatible with genuinely gratuitous natural evil. In this reply, I show that his own arguments fail to achieve their objective; in addition, I point out several respects in which he has misstated my position.

David O'Connor has criticized my arguments for the conclusion that God's existence is compatible with genuinely gratuitous natural evil.[1] Not surprisingly, I think it is his own arguments that fail to achieve their objective. But he has raised some interesting points, and I am happy for the opportunity to respond.

The purpose of my argument was to show, in O'Connor's words, that "if God prevented all genuinely gratuitous natural evil, an outcome inconsistent with God's nature or goals in world-making and world-governance would result, thus . . . God could not prevent all genuinely gratuitous natural evil" (p. 381).[2] Evil is gratuitous if "it is such that an omnipotent being could have prevented it without thereby having prevented the occurrence of some greater good" (p. 24, quoted by O'Connor on p. 381). The divine objectives I allege would be frustrated if God were to prevent all such evil include the promotion of "knowledge, prudence, courage, foresight, cooperation, and compassion"; I go on to explain, "Because nature seems likely to harm or frustrate us in various ways, we are motivated to gain knowledge of its workings, to take thought to avert undesirable consequences, and the like" (pp. 38-39).[3] In order to have a single term by which to refer to such goods, I shall call them "goods of resistance against nature," or more briefly, "goods of resistance."

But why would these divine objectives be frustrated, if God were to prevent all gratuitous natural evil? As O'Connor rightly observes, my response takes different forms depending on whether or not it is assumed that human beings know God is doing this. On the assumption that we do know this, I wrote:

> It is evident that the consequences with regard to the list of goods noted above—knowledge, prudence, courage, foresight, cooperation, and compassion—would be rather drastic. Surely the motiva-

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> tion to acquire and/or respond in accordance with any or all of these goods would be greatly reduced, if not eliminated entirely, if we *really believed* that God would prevent any natural evils which were not essential to the realization of still greater goods. To be sure, we might still have some inclination to avoid outcomes that seemed especially distasteful to us personally—but such an inclination would be of questionable rationality, inasmuch as by preventing those outcomes we would also be preventing the occurrence of goods which are at least equal and possibly greater (p. 39, quoted by O'Connor on pp. 381-82).

As O'Connor correctly observes, the situation envisaged is not one in which no natural evil occurs, but one in which it is known that all natural evil is necessary to the occurrence of greater goods. My claim, as restated by O'Connor, is that in such a situation, by "combatting and counteracting the natural evil that exists . . . —for instance, by alleviating pain and suffering, and so on—we would also be preventing the occurrence of those possibly greater goods for which that natural evil is necessary" (p. 382). "In a purely logical sense," he admits, "Hasker is of course right." Nevertheless, my claim is misleading, as he attempts to show by an example.[4]

The example concerns a certain Socrates, who is "suffering great pain from a contagious illness for which neither he nor anyone else is responsible" (p. 383). Moved by sympathy for Socrates, we treat his pain and succeed in alleviating it. By preventing Socrates' future pain, we also (by hypothesis) prevent the occurrence of the future goods for which that pain would be the necessary condition. So far, there is no disagreement between O'Connor and me. But he regards it as "queer" to describe our action (as I do, by implication, in the quotation above), as motivated by "an inclination to avoid outcomes that seemed especially distasteful to us personally . . . an inclination . . . of questionable rationality, inasmuch as by preventing those outcomes we would also be preventing the occurrence of goods which are at least equal and possibly greater." Why is this queer?

Part of the answer lies in my phrase, "avoid outcomes that seemed especially distasteful to us personally," a locution O'Connor seems to find annoying. Perhaps the phrase does have too egoistical a ring, though I would point out that various things can be very distasteful to a person without being selfishly motivated. The point I had in mind is simply that each of us has a circle, larger or smaller as the case may be, of "special concerns," injury to which has a greater impact on us than a comparable harm to something or someone with which we are not personally connected. I don't think O'Connor would disagree with this.

But O'Connor has a more serious objection: "by being moved by, treating, and alleviating (preventing) Socrates' pain as we did and with the motivation we had, *we are instantiating precisely those greater moral goods* for which, in this case, Socrates' pain is necessary—courage (given the known risk of contagion) compassion, prudence, and so on" (p. 383). In short, rather than our action *frustrating* the achievement of the goods

for which Socrates' suffering is necessary, we are in fact *accomplishing* those very goods. And in view of this, it cannot be maintained that our awareness that Socrates' suffering is not genuinely gratuitous undercuts our motivation to relieve his suffering.

The answer to this seems obvious. It is true that Socrates will suffer more if we do not help him than if we do. But, given that Socrates' suffering cannot possibly be gratuitous (though it may seem to us to be so), the following is the case: If we allow his further suffering, some good will come about as a result of this which is *at least* sufficient to outweigh *all* of his sufferings—a good such that, if we were to grasp it from a God's-eye point of view, we would exclaim: "So *that* is why he suffered!" And we would see that, all things considered, things would have been no better, but might very possibly have been worse, had we stepped in to relieve the suffering. And this, I believe, does indeed tend to lessen (though perhaps not remove entirely) our inclination to relieve Socrates' suffering.

O'Connor, however, sees the situation differently. He envisions us as choosing between two possible worlds: W1, which will result if we choose to help Socrates, and W2, which will result if we choose not to help him. Apart from the considerations involved in the present discussion, we certainly ought to conclude that the best thing to do would be to help Socrates. But by hypothesis, neither world includes any genuinely gratuitous evil. Does this fact have any bearing on our choice between W1 and W2? O'Connor thinks not; he argues that the fact in question "is neutral between the two options" (p. 384). His reasoning is as follows:

> On the one hand there is the idea that, because we know no genuinely gratuitous natural evil will result from our not helping him we are not obligated to help him, that we may, in good conscience, ignore his plight. . . . But, on the other hand, there is the idea that, because we know that, if we help him, we run no risk of inadvertently causing him (or anybody else) gratuitous harm, a possible inhibitor of our helping him is removed, namely, the fear that we might unintentionally cause him needless suffering. In my view the latter idea is at least as plausible as the former (pp. 384-85).

This reasoning is confused. It is true that nothing we can do *or refrain from doing* will cause him or anyone else *needless* (that is, gratuitous) suffering. *That* fear is eliminated no matter what we choose to do; as a consideration for choosing between W1 and W2, it cancels out. There is, on the other hand, the very real possibility that, if we intervene, we will thereby prevent the occurrence of a *greater* good, one which *more than outweighs* the extra suffering Socrates will endure in W2. And this consideration is *not* neutral as between W1 and W2; what it shows is that we have nothing (on balance) to gain by choosing W1 and helping Socrates, and very possibly something to lose. All this contrasts markedly with what, in real-life situations, we usually assume to be the case: namely, that by alleviating Socrates' pain we prevent a significant evil and there

is no particular reason to suppose we will also be forfeiting some important good that would result from his continued suffering. The knowledge that neither W1 nor W2 contains gratuitous evil is by no means neutral in its effect on the choice between them.[5]

O'Connor goes on to cite a number of reasons, drawn from common morality and reinforced by theistic beliefs, why one ought to help Socrates rather than permit him to continue suffering. Of course I agree with this completely. But since, in spite of O'Connor's arguments, the (supposed) knowledge that there is no genuinely gratuitous evil does work to undermine our motivation to help Socrates, the correct conclusion to draw is that a prudent theist should not accept the assertion that gratuitous evil does not exist.

So far, we have been assuming that we humans know, or can know, that God prevents all gratuitous natural evil. But I also consider the possibility that God prevents all such evil, but we humans do not and cannot know this. My main point in this discussion is that there is simply no feasible way God could do this, consistent with his own nature and creative purposes. A key point, never really addressed by O'Connor, is that the prevention of all gratuitous evil is supposed to follow from the *essential nature* of God; because God is morally perfect, such evil cannot be permitted. But clearly it is an important part of God's creative purposes that his rational creatures should come to know what God is like. And, by hypothesis, he cannot achieve this purpose without our also coming to know that he prevents all gratuitous evil. This in itself is sufficient to show that the conjunction, God prevents all gratuitous evil but we humans are permanently unaware of that fact, is not viable.[6]

I do also suggest that, in order to prevent gratuitous natural evil without our knowing it, God would have to engage in massive deception. (Perhaps he could secretly anesthetize humans and animals who are dying in apparent agony, while leaving their behavior such as to suggest great suffering.) In saying this, I had in mind worlds substantially like our own with respect to the natural evils (including apparently gratuitous natural evils) they contain. O'Connor claims, however, that God could create a world (which he calls W4) in which he "pre-emptively prevents" gratuitous natural evils. In such a world there would be no gratuitous natural evil to begin with, and thus no need for God to act "behind our backs," so to speak, in eliminating it. Yet, according to O'Connor, there is no reason why we, the inhabitants of W4, would suppose God was preventing all gratuitous natural evil: in that world, "things being the way they are would be perfectly natural to us" (p. 388).

I must confess I have difficulty understanding how this is supposed to work. According to O'Connor W4, though it contains no genuinely gratuitous natural evil, "does contain the same amount, variety and distribution of both moral evil and ostensibly gratuitous natural evil as . . . the actual world." But this is an impossibility: genuinely gratuitous evil *is* ostensibly gratuitous evil (see p. 34), so to pre-emptively prevent the genuinely gratuitous natural evil is *ipso facto* to prevent a good deal of the ostensibly gratuitous natural evil.[7] But however this may be, O'Connor's argument cannot succeed. For as we have already seen, the

denizens of W4 *would* come to recognize that God prevents all genuinely gratuitous evil as soon as they came to a true apprehension of God's nature, which by hypothesis is incompatible with his permitting gratuitous evil to occur.

There remains O'Connor's "final thought." Many reflective theists have concluded that the existence of genuinely gratuitous evil is incompatible with God's existence, and thus that the actual world cannot contain such evil. But these theists are "not robbed of motivation to acquire, or respond in accordance with, moral goods" (p. 387). In view of this, O'Connor asks "whether it is an intended consequence of [my] position that theists' moral motivation rests on a mistake?"

A good question! The view I am criticizing has indeed been widely accepted by theists, though perhaps it is not so nearly universal as O'Connor implies.[8] But I do not think this means that the moral motivations of these theists are mistaken. The theists I know certainly are inclined to act to relieve suffering. They do this, so far as I can tell, out of genuine care and compassion for their fellow-humans, often supplemented by the thoughts that this is what God expects of them, that in so doing they are imitating Christ, or even that Christ himself stands before them in the person of the needy brother or sister. None of this strikes me as the least bit confused or mistaken. Where they are confused, in my view, is in accepting views concerning theodicy which, if seriously applied in everyday moral existence, would indeed tend to undermine their motivation for works of mercy. Usually, however, this seems not to happen; some of the most compassionate people I know accept the kind of theodicy I am criticizing. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is actively at work in preventing God's people from carrying out in practice the implications of their mistaken beliefs.

But there is another side to the picture. Most often, perhaps, such maxims as "It's all for the best," or "God wants it that way," are invoked at a fairly late stage of an encounter with evil, after everything that humanly can be done, has been done. Sometimes, however, these things are said too soon: Worthwhile plans are abandoned prematurely in the face of supposedly "providential" obstacles that could be overcome by persistent effort, and grave illnesses are accepted as "God's will" when there are still promising treatment options available. When these things happen, the theoretical consequences I have pointed out in this article become all too real in practice.

NOTES

1. David O'Connor, "Hasker on Gratuitous Natural Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 12:3 (July 1995), pp. 380-92. The article to which he is replying is "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 9:1 (January 1992), pp. 23-44. Page references in the test are to these two articles; when a quotation is given without a page reference it will be found on the page most recently referenced.

2. O'Connor is in error, however, in asserting that I claim that the quoted proposition is logically necessary—that "in any possible world *W*, if God

prevented all genuinely gratuitous natural evil…etc." In my article, I state explicitly that my conclusions "rest on certain very general but contingent facts about what the world and human moral agents are like" (p. 42, note 19). (It should also be noted that O'Connor abbreviates "genuinely gratuitous natural evil" as "GGNE"; I prefer to avoid such abbreviations, and for the sake of consistency have eliminated them also in my quotations from him.)

3. It should be noted that these goals do *not* include preventing the undermining of morality, as O'Connor states (p. 381); that is a reason for God not to prevent all gratuitous *moral* evil, but I do not invoke it with respect to *natural* evil. Furthermore, the distinction between genuinely gratuitous evil and ostensibly gratuitous evil applies only to moral evil. In general, O'Connor assimilates my discussion of gratuitous natural evil too closely to the previous discussion of gratuitous moral evil. I will do my best to correct for this distortion in expounding O'Connor's position.

4. But shouldn't we be put on our guard when, in what is after all a logical discussion, we are told that someone is right "in a purely logical sense" but wrong in some other, presumably more profound, sense?

5. In the very same issue of *Faith and Philosophy* that contains O'Connor's article, my argument receives welcome support from Christopher Hughes. Hughes is discussing Thomas Aquinas' doctrine that (in the words of Eleonore Stump) "God won't allow an evil to befall a saint unless in the long run and on balance things will be at least as good for that saint as they would have been had that evil not occurred." Hughes pictures Thomas standing beside a sleeping Francis of Assisi, who is apparently about to receive a painful injury from a heavy object that is coming loose from the ceiling. According to Hughes, "It seems clear that—even if St. Thomas is convinced of the sanctity of St. Francis—he should prevent the object from hitting St. Francis (say, by pushing him out of the way). It would be wrong for St. Thomas to do nothing. But it is unclear why, on St. Thomas' own principles, this should be so. For it is unclear that, on St. Thomas' principles, St. Francis is in any danger of being harmed. After all, St. Thomas believes that God allows only beneficial suffering to afflict the saints. Why couldn't he conclude St. Francis is in no danger of being harmed, on the grounds that God will allow the falling object to hit St. Francis if but only if the suffering it causes St. Francis is beneficial to him?" (Review of Eleonore Stump, ed. *Reasoned Faith*, in *Faith and Philosophy* 12:3 (July 1995), pp. 426-31).

6. William Wainwright makes the following suggestion: "I would have thought that God's essential nature entails all sorts of things that (because of God's transcendence and our epistemic limitations) 'we do not and cannot know.' Yet this is presumably compatible with God's desire that we 'should come to know what God is like.'" Undoubtedly, we cannot fully grasp God's essence. It does not seem very plausible, though, that this inability would extend to God's (supposed) property of being essentially incapable of permitting gratuitous natural evil in his universe. After all, quite a few people suppose that, as things now stand, they discern this to be an essential property of God. But suppose Wainwright is correct, and our epistemic limitations render us incapable of knowing whether or not this is an essential property of God. In that case, it becomes impossible for anyone to construct a problem of evil based on gratuitous natural evil, and the rest of this discussion is unnecessary.

7. As has already been noted, the distinction I draw between ostensibly gratuitous evil and genuinely gratuitous evil applies properly to moral evil, not to natural evil. No doubt a comparable distinction could be worked out

for natural evil, but I will not pursue that project here.

8. Among theodicists who reject it may be mentioned Michael Peterson (*Evil and the Christian God*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), and John Hick. For a clear statement of Hick's view on this, consider the following: "The Irenaean theodicy does not suggest that each individual evil event serves a specific good purpose, or is transformed into a specific good, but that each individual event, evil as well as good, is a contingent part of the actual history of the universe; and that this history as a totality is leading ultimately to the limitless and all-justifying good of eternal life in God's presence" ("Response to Mesle," in C. Robert Mesle, *John Hick's Theodicy: A Process Humanist Critique*, New York: St. Martin's, 1991), p. 131).